Creating Powerful Principal and Coach Partnerships

Diane Sweeney and Ann Mausbach

How principals can elevate the work of coaches to improve student achievement.

The good news is that we know more than ever about the instructional leadership behaviors that result in positive outcomes for students (Robinson, 2011). The bad news is that this research often gets translated into principals feeling like they have to perform a one-person instructional leadership show. Many principals are under enormous pressure to be the superhero of teaching and learning, swooping in to solve every problem, to be everywhere, and to know everything.

Frustration and burnout are obvious consequences of this reality. However, there are more leaders in a school than just the principal, including instructional coaches and teacher leaders. Just as the Avengers are more powerful than the lone superhero, so is the principal who builds partnerships across these groups.

One of the most important relationships a principal has is with his or her instructional coach or coaches. Through our experiences in schools, we have seen how the strength of this partnership directly impacts outcomes for students because it builds collective teacher efficacy. Collective efficacy is defined as "the judgements of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students" (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004, p. 4). We can organize coaching around the principles of collective efficacy by ensuring that it is outcomes-based and designed to directly impact student learning. This approach, referred to as Student-Centered Coaching, is about setting specific goals for students and working collaboratively to ensure that the goals are met (Sweeney, 2011).

Building rich partnerships with coaches requires attention and deliberate effort. When working as a team, a principal and coach will complement, not compete with one another to accelerate student learning. The following practices illustrate how to get there.

Practice #1: Connect Coaching to School Improvement

Historically, coaching and school improvement have merely coexisted. Having a coach participate in PLCs, organize coaching cycles, and plan curriculum doesn't necessarily mean that the school is on an aligned course of improvement. The path to improving a system requires coherence, including a shared depth of understanding about the nature of the improvements and work by all individuals in the system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Schools that have clear benchmarks, with the entire staff working together to meet these goals through learning and collaboration, experience greater results for

students. It's hard for coaches to make a lasting impact if they are unsure of how to connect their work to the bigger picture.

Find Your Focus

Effective schools are focused schools. Achieving focus requires clarity about "the thing"—the initiative that is being implemented to achieve school improvement goals. It is the high-leverage strategy that the adults use in order to reach goals for student success. Thanks to John Hattie's (2015) research, there is no longer a struggle to identify strategies that impact student learning. The key is to select "the thing" that is likely to have the most potential to affect student success based on the specific context of the school's mission, vision, and student data.

What makes "the thing" come to life are the supports that rest underneath it: professional learning and coaching cycles. Both are necessary for changes to take root. The key is to remember that coaching itself isn't an instructional strategy (and that the coach isn't "the thing"). Rather, it is an embedded support that helps all teachers meet the specific goals of the school. This is how school improvement, coaching, and—most important—learning intersect, which underscores why the principal-coach relationship is so pivotal.

Get Clear on the Principal and Coach Roles within the System

Improving student learning requires the principal and coach to be clear about their respective roles in doing so. Consider the following scenario we observed: When the 2nd grade students in Greg's school were struggling with the standard of counting up to and over 100, Greg (a pseudonym) and his school's math coach collaborated on how they could address this issue in their upcoming PLC meeting. The school's "thing" was using formative assessment data to better respond to students' needs. Greg and his coach knew they needed to provide supports that would address areas where students struggled. The math coach came to the meeting with examples of how to use manipulatives that would help with counting up, while Greg shared a short excerpt from a book on math instruction.

During the meeting, the PLC members used a protocol to identify strategies to address the students' needs. Greg acted as the timekeeper while the coach was an active participant, sharing alongside the teachers. Once the team identified realistic strategies to implement, the coach helped the teachers understand what the strategy might look like in the classroom. Teachers who wanted additional support also requested coaching cycles. After the meeting, Greg focused his 2nd grade walkthroughs on observing and providing feedback to teachers on the strategies discussed during their meeting.

A Venn diagram can be a useful tool for defining principal and coach roles, especially when attention is paid to the overlap. The key to a successful partnership is to have laser-like clarity on what those duties look like. In this example, both the principal and the coach understood that professional learning is central to their roles. The coach's role was to model and provide support by sharing ideas and strategies. The principal's role was to facilitate a rich discussion and provide feedback to teachers during implementation of agreed-upon strategies. Both were clear on what the overlap looked like and worked together to support teachers and, ultimately, student learning.

Practice #2: Set Expectations for High-Quality Instruction

In the report, "The School Principal as Leader," the Wallace Foundation identifies how instructional leadership influences student achievement. According to the study, effective school leaders set clear expectations for instructional practice.

> They emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers. They pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone. (2013, p. 11)

Develop Clarity around Instructional Practice

Driving toward high-quality instruction requires a partnership between the principal and coach. The success of this partnership hinges on the principal understanding his or her role in leading learning. Setting and monitoring expectations means a leader has a firm grip on effective practices in curriculum and instruction.

Clarity requires not only having a deep understanding of what a particular practice looks like, but also knowing when teachers should use the practice. This is achieved by working collaboratively with the entire staff to identify look-fors. In other words, if principals go into classrooms looking for evidence of an instructional practice, what would they be looking for? And how can coaches support these practices?

Imagine the following scenario (based on our experiences in the field): As the principal of a comprehensive high school, Karen's vision was to create classrooms where students had the opportunity to grapple with complex ideas. Her district had been studying the work of John Hattie and it struck her that with an effect size of 0.82, classroom discussion would be worth focusing on in the upcoming school year. But she knew that naming classroom discussion as the focus wasn't enough; she needed a clear vision of her expectations for instructional practice. In other words, what were some effective strategies for promoting student discussion that she expected to see every day in every classroom throughout the school?

Jointly Establish Look-Fors

Karen worked with the leadership team to dig into the research around classroom discussion. They tackled open-ended questioning, authentic engagement, and strategies for classroom management, and identified these specific look-fors to make the expectations crystal clear:

- The teacher asks open-ended questions that may be answered in a variety of ways.
- Teacher talk is carefully planned and limited to 10–12 minute increments (mini-lectures).
- Between mini-lectures, students are provided time to discuss, process, and question what they are learning.
- Structures for student talk are used daily (such as protocols, partner work, peer feedback, book clubs, and conferences).
- Students are provided time for discussion before engaging in a graded assignment.

With this clarity, the leadership team was ready to get feedback from the rest of the faculty. This occurred through department meetings in which a broad array of teachers was able to inform the work. The look-fors were revised, which resulted in a shared commitment among faculty. The instructional coach was able to build the identified practices into

coaching cycles. PLCs shared how they were using the practices, and the leadership team met on a weekly basis to plan related professional learning.

Karen knew that accountability would be important, so she and the other leaders with supervision duties embedded the look-fors into their walkthroughs and formal observations. They also made a point to refer to the look-fors when giving teachers post-observation feedback. This sent the message that classroom discussion was expected in each and every classroom. The teachers knew exactly what that meant, and the coach was prepared to support them to make it happen.

Practice #3: Develop a Coherent Coaching Model

Schools with well-developed coaching models create a culture for coaching that is well understood by the school community. Rostron writes:

> Coaching models help us to understand the coaching intervention from a systems perspective, and to understand the need for "structure" in the interaction between coach and client. Models help us to develop flexibility as coach practitioners. They offer structure and an outline for both the coaching conversation and the overall coaching journey. (2009, p. 116)

When schools lack a clearly articulated coaching model, confusion reigns and a precious resource is wasted.

Expect Coaching Cycles

A Student-Centered Coaching cycle involves an instructional coach and teacher (or small group of teachers) working together toward a shared goal. Coaching cycles are measurable and create the conditions to identify how both the students and teacher are growing. For this reason, we advocate for coaches to be in coaching cycles *most* of the time. If not, they often become buried under a long list of duties that make less of an impact on learning.

Student-Centered Coaching cycles have the following characteristics:

- Duration of four to six weeks.
- Driven by a standards-based goal.
- Occur with individual teachers, small groups, or pairs of teachers.
- Include at least one weekly planning session between the coach and teacher(s).
- Include between one to three co-teaching sessions per week.

When a school lacks a defined coaching model, coaches often have too much unstructured time on their hands. Smith (2007) found that when the coach's role was split into multiple responsibilities, the coach's effectiveness was diminished. If we want to impact students, then we need to engage teachers in deep thinking about classroom practices. This only happens when teachers are provided with in-depth support that relates directly to their students.

Measure the Impact of Coaching Cycles

Expecting coaching cycles to occur is the first step for a school leader. The second step is ensuring that they are being measured. We recommend using the "Results-Based Coaching Tool" described in *Student-Centered Coaching: The Moves* to understand how student and teacher learning are impacted by coaching (Sweeney & Harris, 2017). Principals need to know how the coach is supporting the bigger picture of school improvement. One way to create transparency is through a weekly principal and coach meeting. In these meetings, the following actions should occur: (1) The coach provides a review of current and future coaching cycles, using the Results-Based Coaching Tool; (2) the principal shares trends that are observed during visits to classrooms; and (3) the principal and coach plan future professional learning for teachers.

Strength in Numbers

Schools are complex systems, so it is no wonder that leading one is not easy. But strong partnerships can make the job less difficult. When the principal and coach are clear on school improvement initiatives, what high-quality instruction looks like within the school, and how the coaching model supports these efforts, things fall into place. Schools become more joyful, instruction becomes more precise, teachers are happier, and students learn.

Leading is mired in uncertainty and ambiguity. As much as one might want to be strong and all-knowing, the demands of the job make that impossible. Being unsure is natural, and the mark of a great leader is when they aren't afraid to seek help from others. The Avengers' strengths lie in their number, much like the principal's lies in knowing how to forge strong partnerships in service of student learning.

<div>

Guiding Questions

› How do you ensure your school's instructional coaching is aligned to both school improvement goals and individual teacher growth?

› How might you work as a faculty to develop "look-fors" for a specific instructional practice, and incorporate them into observations and coaching cycles?

› What's one way you can commit to improving the principal-coach relationship?

</div>

References

Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2016). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Goddard, R., Hoy, W., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2004). Collective efficacy beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, and future directions. *American Educational Research Association, 33*(3), 3–13.

Hattie, J. (2015). *What works best in education: The politics of collective expertise.* London, UK: Pearson.

Robinson, V. (2011). *Student-centered leadership*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

Rostron, S. (2009). Business coaching international: Transforming individuals and organizations. London, UK: Karnac Books.

Smith, A.T. (2007). The middle school literacy coach: Considering roles in context. In D. W. Rowe, R. T. Jimenez, D. L. Compton, D. K. Dickinson, Y. Kim, K. M. Leander, & V. J. Risko (Eds.), 56th yearbook of the National Reading Conference. Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.

Sweeney, D. (2011). *Student-centered coaching: A guide for coaches and principals.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Sweeney, D., & Harris, L. (2017). *Student-centered coaching: The moves.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning.* Retrieved fromwww.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/The-School-Principal-as-Leader-Guiding-Schools-to- Better - Teaching-and-Learning-2nd-Ed.pdf